

20th August 2023 – PLYMOUTH

'Friendship', led by Rev Kate Whyman

1. **INTRO MUSIC** 'You've got a friend', James Taylor (4'28")

<https://youtu.be/nKaWQxITsRM>

2. **WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHT**

Welcome to you all this morning. You are welcome just as you are and however you are feeling right now. Thank you for being here, for making the time and creating the space in your week for worship and community. And for missing the first half of the world cup final to boot!

This is a community in which we try to support each other on our spiritual journeys through life. And this hour is, as always, a chance for each of us to realign ourselves with all that we hold sacred. It is an invitation to give thanks for the wonder of creation, to reconnect with the divine spirit, and to surrender to the divine mystery in the company others.

The theme of this service is friendship. I seem to return to this theme at this time of year, inspired partly by International Friendship Day, which is always at the start of August, and the Hindu festival of Rhaksha Bandhan which often falls at the end of the month, as it does this year. This is a festival that celebrates love between brothers and sisters in the widest sense. But also because friendships have always been the most important relationships in my life and continue to sustain me, as I know they do many of you. Friendship also feels like part of what we do here, it's part of building community together and a way of putting our spiritual beliefs into practice.

So, as is our custom, let us begin this time of words, music and contemplation by lighting our chalice as a symbol of our free religious faith.

(Do please light one with me if you are able to do so.)

LIGHT CHALICE

May this flame symbolize the spark of friendship and kinship and the bonds of relationship that warm our hearts and feed our souls.

3. OPENING WORDS/PRAYER

Maimonides, a twelfth-century Jewish philosopher, which are quoted in a popular Jewish summer camp song.

Don't walk in front of me, I may not follow.

Don't walk behind me, I may not lead.

Walk beside me and be my friend.'

And a Christian prayer ...

God of love

Walk with me today.

Show me the right way towards freedom and love.

Shine your courage and strength into me.

Bless me, and my family and friends.

And guide me through my hardships and difficulties so I may find everlasting happiness.

Amen

4. 1st Hymn 42 (G) A dream of widening love

We rest awhile in quietness,
the world not to forget,
but rather shape the silence
and words and thoughts we've met

to nobler ways of living,
to hope-filled truth, above
our narrow selves, to seek one
great dream of widening love.

We share a world where sorrow
and poverty and greed
live side-by side with privilege
of wealth beyond true need;
yet though we cannot alter
all ways of humankind,
we ask a strength within us
to right the wrongs we find.

We know that strength is weakened
by narrow truths and fears,
that still we claim true knowledge,
deny the changing years;
yet here, within the silence,
we question what we know,
that through more honest persons
all humankind may grow.

To find Eternal Meaning
deep in each passing hour,
to seek beyond the confines
of our small powers, one Power.
Strength deep within our being,
arise as hope and will:
come, silent living Spirit,
with peace our spirits fill.

Words by Frank R. Clabburn

5. STORY

There are several stories that explain how the festival of Raksha Bandhan started. But this one is about the Hindu god Krishna and a woman called Draupadi...

One day Krishna managed to cut his finger while he was handling sugarcane (which can be quite sharp). Rukmini, his queen, immediately sent her maid to get a bandage, while Krishna's other companion, Sathyabama, rushed off herself to fetch some cloth to bind the wound.

But Draupadi, who was watching all of this, instead of going to find cloth from elsewhere, simply tore off a strip from the beautiful sari she was wearing and used that to bandage Krishna's finger.

In return for her kindness and generosity, Krishna promised to protect Draupadi whenever she was in trouble.

I'd like to thank our friend Rob who kindly gave me two books on friendship which I've found very interesting. And Suzanne for writing a poem she'd like to share with us, reminding us that friends are not only human. It's called 'Canine Friend'.

6. POEM – Canine Friend, Suzanne Bolton

Mountain

From the beginning when we meet
a bound began to flow
together climbed a mountain
and down the other side.

Seaside

Loving to run the water edge

always side by side
dodging fully wet to be
your eyes were full of me.

Canal

Along the canal you ran ahead
the ducks they clucked and clacked and flew away
The horse that tugged the boat along
you passed him with complete respect.

Dartmoor

The miles we covered on the moor
the ponies you ignore, the
sunsets shared between us
this then is forever more.

Riverside

When the snow was deep by the
riverside you sat so close to me
we shared our past sad stories
and closer felt the warmth inside.

Conclude

Now a part of me always missing
we shared both such a lot
thank you my four-legged friend
you taught me how to – cry again.

7. REFLECTION

You might like to use this time to reflect on a friend who is important to you, or to the role of friendship in your life.

But as always, this is your time, and you are of course free to use it as you will, for silent meditation or prayer, or simply to sit and be.

8. **INTERLUDE:** Rituel de la brume, Naïssam Jalal

<https://youtu.be/sWakG25jtVw>

9. **READING** Gospel of John Chapter 15:12-17 in which Jesus speaks to his disciples...

'My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other.'

10. **33 (G) Do You Hear, O My Friend, In The Place ...**

Do you hear, O my friend, in the place where you stand,
through the sky, though the land, do you hear, do you hear,
in the heights, on the plain, in the vale, on the main,
in the sun, in the rain, do you hear, do you hear?

Through the roar, through the rush, through the throng, through the crush,
do you hear in the hush of your soul, of your soul,
hear the cry fear won't still, hear the heart's call to will,
hear a sigh's startling trill, in your soul, in your soul?

From the place where you stand, to the outermost strand,
do you hear, O my friend, do you hear, do you hear,
all the dreams, all the dares, all the sighs, all the prayers –
they are yours, mine, and theirs: do you hear, do you hear?

William Caldwell's 'Union Harmony', words by Emily Lenore Luch Thorn

11. ADDRESS

A few weeks ago I mentioned the importance of friends and how – alongside craving solitude and simplicity on my sabbatical – I also found I needed to balance those two things with companionship and friendship. It was, I realised, as important to spend time with friends as it was to spend time alone. (I don't know where that leaves me on the introvert/extravert scale – maybe somewhere straddling the middle ground, which is where I find myself on most things, to be honest.)

There was a particular moment when what it meant to have friends – and to be a friend – came into sharp focus, when I discovered I had Covid in Orkney – about as far away from home as I could be. I have never previously experienced feeling like a leper (such as we find in the Bible) or an untouchable (as people are described and treated in Hinduism), but having Covid when I was travelling on my own gave me just the tiniest glimpse into how it might feel to be a pariah. By the way, I know that pariah means social outcast, but I didn't know where the word came from so I had to look it up. It turns out it was adapted from the Tamil word 'paraiyan', literally meaning "drummer" which was the hereditary duty of a someone from a low caste. So the word came to mean an 'untouchable'.

So in my newfound 'pariah' state, I travelled wearing a mask. And tried not to get too close or breath on people, which is difficult. The friend I had been planning to stay with next said that actually on reflection it wouldn't be OK for me to visit him. He works in a school, his brother is vulnerable, and so on. My friend was being perfectly kind and reasonable and simply taking care of the other people around him, but I

unreasonably felt quite shocked. Abandoned and let down. Another friend, who I'd been planning to spend some time with, also felt she didn't want to risk getting Covid. She was in the middle of moving house, her father-in-law was unwell, getting Covid wouldn't be a good idea at this time, and so on. Again, all very good reasons, and I might well have said the same in her shoes, but I felt somewhat adrift and unwanted and had nowhere to go. I know. Poor me! So I was incredibly grateful to two friends in Cheddar and another in Brighton who immediately said 'Come and stay with me for as long as you need!' Ha, I thought, now I know who my *real* friends are!

But of course that isn't fair. And I had to ask myself what my own role in friendship is. Surely, it's to be understanding and forgiving, not petty and entitled. Resentful even. How easy it is to feel slighted and rejected if we allow ourselves. Friendship works both ways. In fact, it works more than in just two ways – it's a complex network of relationships with competing and contradictory needs in which we can't always be the priority – who knew!? Friendships are about give and take, with the emphasis on the giving rather than the taking. Still, of course I was very grateful to the friends who offered to take me in when I needed shelter.

I wondered what the Bible has to say about friendship.

Proverbs 17:17 says 'A friend loves at all times,
and a brother is born for a time of adversity.'

The book of Ruth is about friendship and loyalty. The story goes that, following a severe famine, Naomi and her husband took their two sons to live in the country of Moab. Sadly Naomi's husband died, followed years later by her two sons who by that point had married two women called Ruth and Orpha.

Instead of returning to her own home, Ruth insisted on accompanying Naomi to Israel, saying "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay.' Ruth stuck by her mother-in-law during an extremely challenging time. Despite being from different cultures, places and generations, Naomi and Ruth established a deep bond.

We can't form such deep bonds with many people in our lives. They take time and commitment over years.

So what of more ordinary everyday friendship. What about in our church community, for example?

Here is a place where we may find and make friends. We are brought together through a common interest, and become closer by going through thick and thin together, by sharing our lived experiences and a common sense of the spiritual even if we might define that somewhat differently from each other. At our best we work together, and support each other, and encourage each other. We are just the sort of community that Paul was addressing in 1 Thesalonians when he wrote: 'Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.'

'Encourage each other and build each other up' – that certainly sounds like friendship. And the kind of friendship that can be extended more widely than just to one or two people. Mention buddy scheme.

The three women in Krishna's story were all friends – just different levels of friendship. Just as we ourselves can only be close and committed friends to a few, nevertheless we can be friends still to more, and friendly to many. And it feels to me that the wider and more generous our ability to behave as friends to people we know, to strangers and even to our enemies, the closer we will find ourselves to God, who loves us all and urges us to love each other, however challenging that might feel.

We all need friends. Relationship is at the heart of what it means to be human. We have always known, since the dawn of our existence, that we need each other to survive, and that we find meaning and joy in the bonds we form with our fellow humans – as well as animals. When we live as friends to each other, we are living in friendship with the divine too. When we walk alongside each other, we find that the god of our understanding is walking with us as well.

May it be so.

12. THIRD HYMN 177 (G) We can become

Community, supporting friends,
hands joined in unity...
Rejoice, my friend, in fellowship,
in living, full and free.

O let us live with humankind
as sisters, brothers, true.
We'll share our joys, our sorrows share,
becoming as we do.

We all can grow. We can become
our finer selves set free...
Risk what we are, sure in our faith
in what we yet can be.

Music traditional adpt. by David Dawson, words by Doris Jeanine Stevens

13. CLOSING WORDS A Friendship Blessing, John O'Donohue

May you be blessed with good friends.
May you learn to be a good friend to yourself.
May you be able to journey to that place in your soul where
there is great love, warmth, feeling, and forgiveness.
May this change you.
May it transfigure that which is negative, distant, or cold in you.
May you be brought in to the real passion, kinship, and affinity of belonging.
May you treasure your friends.
May you be good to them and may you be there for them;
may they bring you all the blessing, challenges, truth,
and light that you need for your journey.

May you never be isolated.

May you always be in the gentle nest of belonging with your *anam cara*. (*soul-love*)

14. CLOSING MUSIC 'You've got a friend in me', Randy Newman (Toy Story)

https://youtu.be/EYb2QfjKe_4